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Notes on an Anarchist Theory of Language, or, A Sympathetic Critique of Zerzan's Primitivist Refusal of Symbolic Language

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Abstract

The anarcho-primitivist refusal of symbolic language is typically presented in writing or in speech. This obvious paradox can be alleviated by adopting a notion of language that is both more naturalistic and more phenomenological than the one included in the primitivist critique. From the primitivist point of view, a positive consequence is the possibility of a non-hierarchical theory of experience and language, one in which the cut between the two is erased. At the same time, this asubjective theory of experience and language means that the critique of technology and civilisation can not be based on the notions of subjectivity and individuality; a consequence that does not sit well with all of the tenets of anarcho-primitivist thought.

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The Problem: Primitivist Paradox

In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004: 15) anthropologist David Graeber credits author and poet Robert Graves with the (most recent) “invention” of two major intellectual traditions: the idea of a Great Goddess (Mother Earth, Gaia) and a rejection of industrial civilisation. Graeber goes on to say that while pagans have adopted the first idea, a group of primitivists with John Zerzan as the most famous proponent, have taken the rejection of civilisation and hope of its collapse even further by suggesting that the adoption of agriculture was a Big Mistake.¹ Graeber agrees with one of the central claims of primitivist theory: there have been and still are societies (peoples, groups, bands) that display very little of the hierarchical and violent traits of modernity. This is something that the anthropological record is clear on, and while Graeber relies also on contemporary work (partly his own) on contemporary societies, the *locus classicus* of primitivism, Zerzan’s essay “Future Primitive” (1994), credits the seminal work of anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins and Richard Lee. Another common belief for Graeber and Zerzan is that the study of these (typically non-Western) non-hierarchical societies may yield fruitful experiences and knowledge about how to overcome the current unsustainable practices — socially, ecologically, politically, spiritually.²

What does the anthropological record tell, then, according to Graeber, Zerzan and others? Both the examples we have and a theoretical analysis of the reasons of why they are good examples point to the covariant absence of violence and alienation with the absence of agriculture, division of labour and symbolic culture. These three characteristics — agriculture/domestication, division of labour and symbolic culture — form an interweaving common target for primitivist critique. They are not only historically linked in that they seem to arise in human evolution roughly simultaneously, but are also conceptually connected, in that agriculture demands division of labour and symbolic culture, without which it would be impossible

¹ Zerzan (1994: 42) sees the idea of the Mother Earth as a feature of agricultural societies.

² See also Douglas P. Fry’s path-breaking *The Human Potential for Peace: An Anthropological Challenge to Assumptions about War and Violence* (2005). Fry shows that aggression and war are not “natural” to human societies. On the other hand, he does find both agricultural and gatherer-hunter societies that have a culture of peacefulness.

in any large scale. As Zerzan (1999: 41) points out, writing arises as accounting; it is a tool of hierarchy from its very inception: "The earliest writings are records of taxes, laws, terms of labor servitude." Zerzan sees that even if these three and other interconnected phenomena — such as hierarchy, gender systems, organised violence, etc. — could in abstract thought be picked apart and analysed in separation, such an analysis is not helpful as it loses the integral live phenomenon: "Self-domestication through language, art, and ritual inspired the taming of animals and plants that followed" (ibid.: 28). One important consequence to remember is that for Zerzan, the progress of domestication implies the *increase* of violence — contrary to the received understanding of the meaning of the term.

These two anarchists, Graeber and Zerzan, part ways in suggesting the lessons of the anthropological observations. While Zerzan thinks that only primitive conditions may provide for full human realisation, Graeber (2004: 16) does see something quixotic in anarcho-primitivism, comparing it again to Graeues' work: "[. . .] it is really impossible to know on what level one is supposed to read it. It's both ridiculous self-parody, and terribly serious, at the same time." Though Graeber does not elaborate, one can guess that one supposed element of self-parody in primitivism is the fact that primitivists' texts, including Zerzan's often erudite and richly sourced essays, read a lot like highly civilised treatises, thus in a way taking part in the specialised, mediated and symbolic culture they at the same time refuse. Zerzan himself notes the paradox at the end of the essay "Language: Origin and Meaning" (in Zerzan 1999), but goes on to say that he has to use words in order to speak. Indeed, we might want to accept Zerzan's primitivist analysis of the "Big Mistake" only to end up with a conundrum: if symbolic thought is necessary to reification, objectification and alienation, how is it possible to work against it in words, by writing and speaking? One of the things that makes writing and speaking about primitivism "ridiculous" is, presumably, precisely this strict impossibility of practising what one preaches — an impossibility that is in a sense as troubling as the practical impossibility of gatherer-hunter livelihoods on the contemporary depleted and overpopulated planet.

This paradox might also be at the heart of a curious passage in an interview of Zerzan by Derrick Jensen. The context is a discussion on violence and words as weapons. Jensen is frustrated by the fact that while talking is being done, the world deteriorates further and nature is being destroyed. Jensen (2000) says: "Or to take another example,

I recently read that Gandhi wrote a letter to Hitler appealing to his conscience, and was amazed that it didn't work." Here is Zerzan's answer: "Gandhi's failure doesn't mean words must always fail. He was obviously directing his words at the wrong place. Had he spoken more radical and effective words to his fellow Indians, things might be different there now." This is a relatively surprising answer, compared, for instance, with the blanket statement: "Along these lines, in terms of structure, it is evident that 'freedom of speech' does not exist; grammar is the invisible 'thought control' of our invisible prison. With language we have already accommodated ourselves to a world of unfreedom" (Zerzan 1999: 34). Do or do not words always fail? Or, to put it in another way, where does the — obvious — liberating and healing power of language stem from?

To answer these questions we have to look closely at Zerzan's critique of symbolic culture and language, at the same time remembering that these are not to be separated from the larger phenomenon of which they are parts. Hopefully, this way we might be able to alleviate the paradox without throwing the baby out with the bathwater; that is, without losing the overall critical analysis of civilisation and the Big Mistake.

What is Wrong with Language?

The quote above already locates the crux of the critique: language is a structure set upon more amorphous and free experience. More particularly, "Symbolising is linear, successive, substitutive; it cannot be open to its whole object simultaneously. Its instrumental reason is just that: manipulative and seeking domination. Its approach is 'let a stand for b' instead of 'let a be a.' Language has its basis in the effort to conceptualize and equalize the unequal, thus bypassing the essence and diversity of a varied, variable richness" (Zerzan 2002: 2). The claim that symbols and language have a petrifying effect is, as such, a relatively well-known theme even in standard Western philosophy of language³ and philosophical anthropology,

³ For instance, the anarchist philosopher Paul Feyerabend devoted his posthumously published work *Conquest of Abundance. A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (1999) to the theme of how Western philosophy has been obsessed with a trend of oversimplification and a habit of glorifying the oversimplified.

as Zerzan demonstrates with ample quotations in “Language: Origin and Meaning.”

To be sure, most contemporary philosophical thought on language agrees with Zerzan that symbolisation in some sense obstructs or constructs experience. There are some schools in the so-called analytic tradition of philosophy of language, where thought (proposition) and language (representation) are seen as independent. Consequently, the dependence of thought on language (i.e., linguistic relativism) is denied, and the ultimate freedom of symbolic thought asserted. However, already Bertrand Russell (2002: 218), a classic of the analytic tradition, saw a connection between grammar and philosophical thought. In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* Nietzsche famously speculated on the influence of Indo-European grammar on Western metaphysics and the difference in comparison to Uralic-Altaic languages (Nietzsche 1999). Since Nietzsche, the idea that language somehow forces its stamp on thought and experience in spite of the wish or will of the experiencing subject has been a mainstay of many schools of continental thought. In fact, one of the main themes of 20th century phenomenology in Germany (Heidegger) and France (Sartre) is the description of how language — widely understood — forms that very subjectivity and the social structures around it. An extreme example is the thought of Jacques Lacan, where the introduction of the infant to the symbolic universe is the founding gesture of subjectivity (see, e.g., Žižek 1996; interestingly, Žižek (2008: 52) agrees on the violent nature of symbolisation: “there is something violent in the very symbolisation of a thing, which equals its mortification”).

Corresponding to this idea of language as an oppressive filter on experience is both the philosophical and artistic craving for a form of experience (and possibly expression) that would be free of ossified linguistic structures. As an example one can mention Schopenhauer’s notion of music as the direct life of *Wille*, without the practical and symbolic — and therefore servile — sides of all other forms of art. One form of this craving is the (romantic) ideal of art-for-art’s-sake, art without any ulterior motives that would demand structures on experience.

The insistence on non-symbolic experience is often seen as naïve. Many schools of philosophy otherwise sympathetic to the ideas of liberation and emancipation point out that pure or unmediated experience does not exist. Often this claim of non-existence is taken further by claiming that, consequently, a search for pure experience is not only empirically misguided but also ethically dubious. For

example, a Lacanian theorist would point out that human subjectivity is formed by the structures of the symbolic universe so that a yearning for pure experience is a yearning beyond not only subjectivity but also humanity altogether. No doubt, many Lacanians would find the idea of pure experience not so much a topic to be discussed but a symptom to be diagnosed. Likewise, a postmodernist thinker would point out that “there is nothing beyond text”; all meaning is constructed. If there is something beyond text then that something can not by definition be meaningful. This Derridean point is close to Wittgenstein’s (2001) argument against private language: meaningful language is by definition something shared and intersubjective. Therefore a language fully liberated from the structures of grammar, ideology and so on would presumably lose its intelligibility — we get the paradox of primitivist texts in a new form. The problem is not only related to meaning and communication, but also social. For instance, a Foucaultian theorist would say that an insistence on pure experience is a move in a game of power/knowledge with specific effects and as such impotent to move outside the existing co-ordinates of epistemologically relevant action.

In sum, most of contemporary continental theory (as well as analytic philosophy, in its critique of the “myth of the given” (see Sellars 1956), i.e., the myth of a theory-free — or symbol-free or interpretation-free — experience) agrees that the structures of meaning and subjectivity are the structures of language, understood in a wide sense. Thus the eradication of language in favour of a non-interpretative, non-symbolic or direct experience is at best an illusion of pre-human existence and at worst a proto-authoritative quest for unproblematic and uncritical authenticity beyond both subjective and intersubjective criteria. Put briefly, according to the critique, to insist on pure experience is to elevate something that can not be discussed or criticised into a decisive role, thereby promoting a world of might-makes-right.

To his credit Zerzan is willing to face the paradox and go all the way. If the intersubjectivity of social life and meaningful communication are, indeed, dependent on and constructed out of symbolic language, and if the road to direct experience means languagelessness, then we have to do without intersubjectivity and communication in the senses given to them in the theories mentioned above: “And if timelessness resolves the split between spontaneity and consciousness, languagelessness may be equally necessary” (Zerzan 1999: 31). That, most certainly, means doing without a civilisation recognisable

from a Lacanian, Derridean or Foucaultian perspective. Zerzan's primitivism accepts no half-measures here.

Getting Rid of Symbolic Language

However, there is a deeper problem at issue. Let us proceed by way of an analogy. Anarcho-primitivism is not about survivalism or life-boatism. It may be possible for a healthy young person to live in primitive conditions (say, in a forest without modern technology); however, that is not the interesting thing. The interesting problem is how to live without civilisation in larger, social groups consisting of several generations for long periods of time. Analogously, it may very well be possible to temporarily get rid of ossified symbolic language (say, in artistic or religious contexts), but that is not the interesting problem. The interesting case is language that is social, multi-generational and non-alienating. Let us call this interesting case that of "collective non-symbolic language."

The anthropological record also tells us that egalitarian and non-alienated band-societies, including the classic case of !Kung Bushmen, often rely on rich oral traditions and engage in story-telling and other types of discussions on a daily basis (Lee 1968: 37).⁴ There is no *prima facie* reason to think that this is "symbolic communication," at least no better reason than to think that primitive stone tools are "technology." Indeed, one may offer the hypothesis that in both cases, i.e., in overgeneralising stone tools as technology and all language as symbolic communication, the mistake is to take the self-understanding and self-description of Western metaphysics at face value. Western metaphysical civilisation believes that all language is symbolic communication and that all engagement with the environment is technology. If these beliefs were true, it would certainly make the case for civilisation much stronger. These beliefs are also the driving force behind the critique according to which the abandonment of reason and communicative rationality means also the abandonment of ethics in favour of authority and violence.

⁴ See also Graeber's emphasis on the centrality of oral traditions in modern day "Provisional Autonomous Zones" in Madagascar (Graeber 2007). The orality of the linguistic tradition may be crucial here. As James C. Scott (2010) has argued, the state-evasive practices of many peoples in upland Southeast Asia include the loss of literacy: in order to live without state hierarchy certain groups have become effectively post-literate.

Here, it is important to note that the consistent refusal of intersubjective communicative symbolic language by Zerzan does not, as such, answer to the criticism that at the same time meaningful criteria of ethics are lost, and that the search for immediacy and experience happens in a vacuum where authority and force have all the assets on their side. Two points have to be noted here. First, again to his credit, Zerzan does not brush the problem under the carpet by claiming that experiential intensity or immediacy would somehow guarantee non-authoritarian or non-hierarchical conditions. Experiential intensity and immediacy does have a part in individual and collective oppression and murderousness. Second, this is where the anthropological observation that non-civilised and egalitarian societies *do* exist becomes crucial. Of course, it would in principle be possible to claim that given the failure of civilisation, the refusal of the essential symbolic structures making civilisation possible — and consequently the refusal of civilisation — would be advisable even if we had no examples of successful non-civilised life: the refusal would be a “jump into the abyss.” However, the increased division of labour, exploitation of nature, spiritual alienation, and so on, seem to go together (and, *vice versa*, the fact that when these are decreased, we may come close to a form of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, sustainability and nonviolence) give the primitivist argument against symbolic structures the nature of a programme and provide it with a direction (toward primitive’ conditions). However, in order to answer to the ethical problem, this direction has to be supplemented with an idea of how the slide down the slope of intersubjective communicative symbolic language is to end in an egalitarian and anarchistic situation and not, say, in an experientially exited rabid nationalism or ethnicism. This is the experiential side of the political problem of how the collapse of state power is to lead to a more egalitarian and anarchist society, and not to the rule of warlords and Mafia thugs (a problem that concerns Graeber in *Possibilities* (2007)).

With regard to the ethics of the issue, it is instructive to look at the case of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose thought serves as a springboard for nearly all contemporary continental and postmodern philosophy, including Derrida and Foucault. What does Heidegger say about the relationship between symbolic language and experience? The case of Heidegger is revealing because he has been accused of making precisely the mistake of giving full reign to the search for authentic experience and thereby falling into the allure

of Nazism (see Derrida 1991 and Žižek 1999). Heidegger's philosophy presents humans first and foremost as engaged and embodied beings that can under certain circumstances function as individual subjects. However, primordially and for the most part humans are a "distributed" opening and experiencing of a shared always-already meaningful world to which they are thrown (this mode of existence Heidegger calls *Dasein*). Heidegger criticises contemporary civilisation for forgetting this fundamental human constitution and covering it up by the object-like structures of subjectivity, science, rationality and so on. For Heidegger, the subject and the object are both structures that are under certain conditions (those of Western metaphysics) built on a more primordial asubjective and aobjective level of being-in-the-world (see Heidegger 1993 and the commentary in Dreyfus 1990).

When Heidegger insists that losing oneself into the everyday averageness (*das Man*) of what-everybody-says and what-everybody-wants can be countered by resolutely facing mortality and anxiety that reveal a more authentic way of being, the danger of misusing the notion of authenticity does, indeed, appear. For instance, it can be claimed that this Heideggerian description leaves too much room in terms of the content of authenticity: almost any resolute facing of death and anxiety will do.⁵ Accepting that human being is based on nothing and that all meaning is going to die, and still resolutely pushing ahead and "choosing a hero in the generational battle of a people" (as Heidegger puts it in the end of *Sein und Zeit*) becomes a voluntaristic enterprise: national socialism will do, if it promises a rooted and embodied stand in the face of nothingness. Losing oneself in the "authentic" national (*völkisch*) experience, one loses all intersubjective or universal ethical criteria. Heidegger (1976) does claim, for instance, that the overcoming of Western metaphysics is a problem that can be encountered only in the German language; if Heidegger is right, we who do not speak German as a native language just have to accept this claim without really being able to evaluate it. The same goes for national experience: we who do not belong to it, can not really criticise it or its authenticity either. However, from the anarcho-primitivist perspective the critique of Heidegger should not concentrate on the fact that Heidegger tries to undermine the criteria of communicative rationality (a goal that anarcho-primitivism shares with Heidegger), but rather on the fact that he

⁵ See the analysis of Heidegger as a decisionist by Krockow (1990).

did not radically enough question structures like division of labour and hierarchy, both of which characterised his views on politics and philosophy.⁶

Language, Subjective and Asubjective

How does this ethical problem apply to a primitivist search for immediate experience? We have to go back to Zerzan's critique of language. In Zerzan's account, language introduces a distance between humans and nature and humans and their experience: "Though language, in its definitive features, seems to be complete from its inception, its progress is marked by a steadily debasing process. The carving up of nature, its reduction into concepts and equivalencies, occurs along lines laid down by the patterns of language. And the more the machinery of language, again paralleling ideology, subjects existence to itself, the more blind its role in reproducing a society of subjugation" (1999: 33). In this very basic sense, language is a tool of alienation, when alienation is understood as explained by Zerzan: "Marx defined alienation as being separated from the means of production. Instead of producing things to use, we are used by the system. I would take it a step further and say that to me it means estranged from our own experiences, dislodged from a natural mode of being" (Zerzan in Jensen 2000).

To be sure, this tendency exists in language. Heidegger's description of the average everydayness of language and its way of levelling authentic existence provides a similar description. But is this all there is to language?

To say that language is necessarily or only a tool of alienation seems strange given the full continuum of language from the simple cries and calls of animals to full-fledged human language. There seems to be no clear-cut point where the "language" of animals and babies (or, non-alienated, intoxicated, impaired, etc., humans) turns into the necessarily alienating symbolic structure (Zerzan) or the calculating, translatable and universalisable language of the market place and the sciences (Heidegger). Indeed, given the rich variety of calls and cries in the animal world, it is little wonder that scientists widely agree that some animals do possess rudimentary

⁶ The ethical problem in Heidegger and his critique of technology is further discussed in Vadén (2004).

symbolic language. Consider the putty-nosed monkey with its three distinct warning calls, “predator-in-air,” “predator-in-tree,” “predator-on-ground” (Arnold, Pohlner, and Zuberbühler 2008, Arnold and Zuberbühler 2008). These calls do not work as reflexes on visual or other sensory stimuli, but are generalised and contextualised, i.e. “symbolic.” Similar observations have been made with regard to dolphin and whale “languages.”

Looking from the other end, it is obvious that human “language” is not always symbolic. The first sounds made by a new-born can hardly be classified as language. However, at some point in the typical development of a child a mature linguistic proficiency is acquired. This means that in nature symbolic language develops out of something that is less-than-symbolic, whether we want to call it language or not. Likewise, in naturalistic (and non-Chomskian) cognitive science, it is usually thought that full-fledged conceptual and representational structures emerge through processes of learning from a more primordial level of non-conceptual and non-representational content.

It seems that Zerzan would not like to call this less-than-symbolic content linguistic. For him, language is in essence communicative, and communication is defined as the transmission of symbolic messages. Or, to put it in another way, language is the structured medium through which experience may be communicated: “It is easier still to begin to locate language in these terms if one takes up another definition common to both ideology and language: namely, that each is a system of distorted communication between two poles and predicated upon symbolization” (1999: 32). Here communication is defined as a process where I first experience something inside myself, then code this something into the structures of language, which are then pushed outside of myself by being spoken or written, after which the receiver decodes the structures and arrives at some mental content and possibly experiences. Again, this may well be a big part of language. It is often taken to be the most important or essential part, as in the Wittgensteinian argument against a private language. According to this view, language as communication should be as clear and as unambiguous as possible; this forms the kernel of the view of language as representative counting and accounting that Heidegger, among others, strongly criticises.

However, again both a more empirical and naturalistic as well as a more phenomenological look at language point out that this is not all there is. Even in mainstream analytic philosophy, it has

been observed that certain parts of natural languages do not, in fact, possess well-defined intersubjective content. For instance, indexical words are meaningfully used even though they do not systematically represent or symbolise, i.e., even though their content is non-conceptual (Peacocke 1995). Likewise, a Heidegger or a Bataille would insist on the non-communicative nature of language. For Heidegger (2007), language is first and for the most part a way in which the world opens itself to us in experience. This opening-up is engaged, distributed and practical, and only under certain circumstances (like the modern West) does the experience get articulated into subjects and objects and the linguistic structures that correspond to them. For Bataille (1988), language is not communication but rather communion, in which experiential energies are expanded and expended as through wounds.

Let us imagine three concentric circles. They could be a house on a yard inside a forest.⁷ In the innermost circle, the house (the *oikos*), things have their definite places and utilitarian functions. Order is established, and words, as names, can systematically refer to objects needed. This circle is limited by the walls, floors and roof of the house, so that a relative stability of conditions guarantees the relative permanence of relationships and functions inside. The house is essentially a hub of control and permanence, and as a limited economy it engages in import and export. Around the house is the yard, with some cultivated patches, maybe buildings for storage and work, and pathways between the various buildings. Here the order and functionality already attained in the house is challenged. The wind may sweep away some spoken words, and make speech indistinguishable from animal grunts. The paths grow in unless used. Fences have to be erected, livestock protected from beasts. Anthropocentric areas have to be continually cultivated. The perimeter of this circle is more porous and therefore demands more upkeep than the perimeter of the house. Finally, there is the forest. Here there is no order or limit set by humans. The forest does not have to follow any rules or laws, not even its own. Humans may visit the forest and the forest ultimately visits itself on the yard and house. The language of the forest is not the setting-to-place and setting-to-work of the house. But the forest is not mute.⁸ The meaningful processes in

⁷ Or, if one prefers an aquatic myth more in line with the Kantian-Schopenhauerian metaphor of reason as ground/ship and experience as the sea: the house on an island in the middle of the ocean.

the forest may be very long and sophisticated, spanning over many human generations.

The first circle corresponds to language-as-symbolic-communication. In the house the circumstances for subjects and objects are present. The subject and the object are strictly correlative: there can not be one without the other. However, the subject and the object are something natural, too. This simply because there is nothing extra-natural. Therefore they are forms that non-subjective and non-objective experience may under certain circumstances assume: they come later in the development, so they are dependent on the earlier, not *vice versa*. The second circle is the area where subjectivity is contested, where it is at times achieved and at times lost. Here language too is more rudimentary; more like a tool or a process, torn between the pressures and demands of the house and the forest.⁹ Finally, the forest is an area of asubjective (meaning something that does not privilege either the subjective or the non-subjective) experience and language.

Typically, asubjective experience is described in “negative” terms; such as, for instance, Heidegger’s notions of anxiety and nearness-

⁸ The Finnish national epic, *Kalevala*, is based on a body of poems collected during the 18th and 19th centuries. The poems were part of an oral tradition, where each singer of the poems remembered a set by heart. One of the major narrative tensions in the poems is the partly friendly, partly rivalrous relationship between two groups of people. Kaleva is the southern, sea-going, more agricultural and eventually Christianised community where most of the male heroes of the epic live. Pohjola is the Northern, dark, primitive, gatherer-hunter community, which, crucially for the plot, has all the eligible maidens and is led by the matriarch Louhi. The focal thing in the poems is called Sampo, a mythical mill that without human intervention, effort or labour gives all wanted riches to its possessors. The Sampo is in Pohjola, and in the epic it gets robbed and eventually destroyed by the Kaleva heroes. The tension between Kaleva and Pohjola can be interpreted as the tension between incipient agricultural society and a gatherer-hunter society which under Western pressure insists on the “old” ways. (In the epic, this older conflict is repeated in the inner conflict that Kaleva faces through the process of Christianisation). In this interpretation, Sampo represents the kernel of Pohjola’s lifestyle – it represents the leisurely and easy life of gathering and hunting in Pohjola in the eyes of the toiling and more civilised Kaleva people. With regard to the topic at hand, the poems say: “Sampo did not lack words, Louhi did not lack incantations”; or in John Martin Crawford’s translation from 1888: “Incantations were not wanting, Over Sampo and o’er Louhi, Sampo growing old in singing, Louhi ceasing her enchantment.” (<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/kalec10.txt>). For the interpretation in detail as well as the connection to Zerzan’s primitivism, see Vadén (2005).

⁹ Language in the second circle corresponds to Wittgenstein’s (2001) description of language-games.

of-death. The crucial thing about anxiety for Heidegger (1993) is precisely that in anxiety there is no object of experience (unlike in fear, in which there is always the intentional structure of being “afraid-of-x”; consequently, for Heidegger fear is an emotion that a subject can have, while anxiety is an experience that *Dasein* undergoes) and no subject either: the subject is dissolved in anxiety — this dissolution is a big part of the “negativity” of anxiety. Somebody like Bataille (1988) might turn his attention to more “positive” cases of asubjective experience, such as sexual or religious enrapture. It may be that a well-defined Western (adult) subject needs such “extreme” forms of experience for the hold of the subject to loosen its grip, but otherwise we may well expect that there are less extreme and less “glorious” forms of asubjective experience. Again, the experience of young babies or very old persons, as well as experiences of profound boredom, intoxication, overjoy and so on may dissolve the subject/object distinction.

It is important to notice that the difference between asubjective and subjective experience is not the same as the difference between unconscious and conscious experience.¹⁰ Asubjective experience can be both conscious or unconscious. The same goes for language. There is no reason why asubjective experience could not be linguistic, could not be in language. What it can not be is the expression of inner mental states in external symbols. This does not mean that asubjective language (language in the forest) is always or by its nature somehow more simple, elementary or naïve compared to subjective language. The pre-conceptual language of infants is only one example; some forms of asubjective language may demand complex, subtle and sophisticated — if not Byzantine — skills, a long life of committed practice. Here one might think of certain communal (let us say the language used while walking in the forest by a group of villagers who have lived together all their lives) or artistic practices (let us say a group of surrealists practising automatic writing), or of oral traditions, in general.

What is asubjective language, then? Maybe an extreme example could be useful in showing the room for manoeuvre. In order to be grammatical, sentences in Indo-European languages typically need to have a subject. Even in the so-called passive voice with no definite agent, a surrogate subject is used (“*It* is raining,” “*Es* regret”). This might lead one to believe that asubjective language is

¹⁰ For an elaboration of asubjectivity see Pykkö (1998) and Vadén (2006).

an impossibility, since grammatical sentences (and, in consequence, communicative language) always have a subject, even if only a surrogate one. However, the passive form *in*, for instance, Finnish is completely subjectless. It is also objectless as nothing is predicated (there is no X that is said to be Y, no “it” that is doing the raining or no “it” that has the property of raining). For example, let us consider the Finnish verb “*ajaa*” (“to drive,” “to go after,” “to hunt”). In the first person singular (“I drive”) the verb would be “*Minä ajan*.” When we start diminishing the subjectivity of the sentence, an inflexion (“-*stu/sty*, -*utu/yty*”) inside the verb can be used: “*Minä ajadun*” (“I am being driven.”). Again, we need to note that the Finnish has no connotation or implication that this “being driven” is being done by something or somebody; there is no agent structure of “driven-by-x.” The inflexion simply indicates that my ending up somewhere is not controlled by me and may be happening against my subjective will. The inflexion indicates the dissolution of the subject, even if the subject is still present in the sentence. Further down the road is the completely de-subjectivised passive voice, “*Ajetaan*,” in which there is no subject, surrogate or otherwise. Crucially, the passive voice has no gender, no number, no subject and no object. Thus, in translating it to English, one has to introduce these structures; “Driving is being done,” “There is driving,” “Drivingness happens,” or something similar.

The examples from Finnish are not presented in the sense that asubjective language could be found only in exotic environments or languages. Asubjectivity may be *easier* to find in languages on the fringes of Western colonisation and globalisation, as they might have preserved more of the linguistic traces that have already been pruned from the core languages of techno-civilisation. However, it is entirely possible, indeed quite likely, that when properly attended to, words like “death,” “mother,” “friend” do not permit a clear cut subject-object distinction even when used in everyday English.

Here things turn metaphysical in a sense. Let us consider an analogy. If someone believes that all things are caused and determined, then it is impossible to empirically prove to her the opposite. If we point out that according to quantum mechanics, individual quantum phenomena happen randomly (and that the randomness is ontological, not epistemological), she can retort that this is only because the causal Grand Unifying Theory that brings together quantum mechanics and relativity theory has not been invented yet. The same goes here. If someone believes that all language is communicative

and symbolic, then it is impossible to empirically prove to her that asubjective language exists. Given the examples above, she can insist that humans are born with an innate language, whose grammar governs also cases like “Ajetaan,” even if the structures can not be systematically identified from the surface morphology.¹¹ This deafness to asubjective language is quite consistent with the practice of “discovering” a grammar in the non-European languages of colonised peoples; funnily enough the grammars all tend to look a lot like the grammar of Latin. Grammatical structures and conceptual content have been insisted upon also in the case of pidgin or Creole languages, which are in a state of constant flux so that what was “correct” or “grammatical” a decade ago has changed by now. However, any thinker that takes even a very rudimentary form of naturalism seriously has to take into account the continuum mentioned above as well as the fact that more recent and structured phenomena have to be explained in terms of older and less structured ones. Symbolic language, if anything, is a prime example of a relatively recent and structured phenomenon. Consequently, it has to be explained in terms of an older and less structured non-symbolic language.

How Can Words Not Fail?

It seems that Zerzan’s view of the essentially symbolic and alienating nature of language has, so to speak, bought the propaganda of the Western victors too totally. Indeed, both the belief that symbols and numbers are essential structures of progress, and the mirroring belief that they are essentially alienating, contain a dose of overconfidence. For if it is the case that symbolic language is based on non-symbolic language, then symbolic language also always relapses back to the non-symbolic and gets its live effect — the communion — from asubjective strata.

In “Language: Origin and Meaning” Zerzan writes: “The question is how did words first come to be accepted as signs at all? How did

¹¹ The fact that these supposedly universal structures and definitions correspond to the Latin-derived structures of the colonising Indo-European languages should give any anarcho-primitivist pause. Chomskian linguistics notwithstanding, it is hard to see why an anarchist theory of language should insist on the universality of structures that are clearly culture-specific. This point is even more acute, if there is a link between the grammar of a language and the metaphysical worldview that the native speakers of that language are inclined to learn.

the first symbol originate? Contemporary linguists find this ‘such a serious problem that one may despair of finding a way out of its difficulties’” (1999: 35). The only naturalistic answer to this question is that they never did, or at least, they are never completely able to persist as signs.¹² We may under favourable conditions pretend that words function as symbols and that we are able to communicate by using them, but the conditions do not have to deteriorate very much (chemically, physically, psychologically, socially) for the illusion to disappear. The functioning of words as symbols is something that is socially produced, takes hard work and necessitates a pervasive education. The structures of natural languages are connected to the ways of life. If there are different ways of life, there are different linguistic (and cognitive) structures. If and when the structures of Indo-European grammar are universalised or globalised — as the project of Western philosophy, academia and so on has been doing for 2000 years — we get a stratum of language that is translatable.

Zerzan’s critique of the implied obscurantism and quietism of postmodernism is laudable, but he skips too quickly over the (Derridean) postmodern idea that language is never fully able to represent, to become symbolic, to let a stand for b. There is a kernel of truth in this contention, moreover, a kernel that can be well connected to the fact that language is a piece of nature. The realm of language is a full continuum with no discrete jumps or transcendental areas. This is exactly what one would expect in nature. The same goes for experience. There are no unquestionable areas of experience. There is no transcendently pure human symbolic language that once and for all separates us from animals, and there is no unquestionably authentic non-alienated linguistic experience (be it poetic, national, philosophical or whatever). This is the way we should interpret Heidegger’s dictum “every culture is potentially all cultures.” (1999: 33) There is no cultural or linguistic authenticity that could not be, in principle, criticised or reached from a different starting point. The claim of such authenticity is always a metaphysical gesture of wanting to step outside this world, outside the real-life negotiation and struggle of influence and effect. At the same time we have to notice

¹² To put a poetic Heideggerian or “embodied cognition” spin on this conclusion, we could say that the experiential origins of language tie it inexorably with our being in the world; the root cause for the ultimate failure of symbolic language is our mortality. The formula “let a stand for b” never fully succeeds because ultimately, in dying, no “stand-for” or “stand-in” is allowed. If we were gods or immortal AIs, then pure symbolism might be possible.

that actualising this potentiality is no minor task. Changing the ways of life of a culture, and in that sense becoming another culture, is not an easy and not a fast process — certainly it is not something attainable by a person or subject at will or during one generation. So the experiences of things like technology in other cultures may be in a sense transcendent to us. We can not reach them in our lifetimes, or even if we could, it would mean that we would be transformed beyond recognition. The change of a culture is, by definition, a social and multi-generational enterprise, and as such belongs to the sphere of asubjectivity, not subjective choices.

In the case of music, Zerzan allows a qualification: it is mainly tonal music that is a picture and element of hierarchy (1994: 75). It seems that we need to do the same kind of adjustment in the case of language: it is mainly symbolic, conceptual, subject/object language that is a tool of alienation. But to claim that tonal music is all music or that symbolic language is all of language is naturalistically unacceptable.

There is an interesting parallel in Zerzan's notion of the subject or self. Zerzan often writes in a tone that suggests that current industrial civilisation leads to an underdeveloped or fragmented subjectivity, alienated from a natural fullness. However, as already seen above, the subject is — in all the senses that Zerzan insists in the case of language — a structure of hierarchy and servility. The subject is a structure of repetition and predictability. What it means to be a subject is to act and to think similarly — or at the very least understandably — to other subjects given the circumstances. What it means to be a subject is to perceive the world as objects. Again, learning to be a subject takes time and training. Moreover, it is something that humans may fail to achieve. All of this suggests the asubjective below the subjective. The subject is, by definition, hostile to the asubjective, since the asubjective means the dissolution of the subject. This dissolution is behind both the horror and the enthusiasm that the subject feels when confronted with asubjective experiences. The function of the subject is to guarantee a sense of permanence, continuity and control amid the flux of experience. The subject can never "asubjectify" itself; the dissolution has to be initiated by something non-subjective, such as the forest.

This structural and control-driven side of the subject is sometimes made less clear by the other common usage of the term "subject": in this other sense the subjective is the individual's point of view, in contrast to the objective (or intersubjective) view. However, on

closer inspection the subject as idiosyncrasy falls back to the subject as structure. The separation of experience into individuals with viewpoints of their own opening into an objective or common world is already made from a position where the subject/object distinction is assumed. Correspondingly, individuality is a structure of control by which common experience is domesticated by the rules of *divide et impera*.

In the case of a language like Finnish, the imperial nature of the subject is clear. Like we saw above, when translated into Indo-European languages (such as the Swedish and the Russian of the historical colonialists), the subject has to be introduced into the translation. When Finnish is taught at schools and universities, the subject is equally introduced through the theories of grammar, linguistics, philosophical logic and so on. Given enough time, this introduction turns into an occupation. A European subjectivity is formed and lives among the possible residues of asubjective experience still contained in Finnish language and experience.¹³ A sentence of "Finnish" may thus contain both elements of asubjective experience and the metaphysics of subjectivity. The subject as an occupier is hostile to the asubjective experience, which in turn forms an anti-subjective tendency manifesting itself socially as mutism, suicide, alcoholism, hermetism and so on. These traits as well as the peculiarities of the language are something that the Finns that aspire to European-ness and Western maturity feel as an embarrassment, something to be eradicated, civilised. However, asubjective experience as such is wholly indifferent with regard to both the subjective and anti-subjective tendencies of experience.

An important corollary of the conclusion that sees the subject

¹³ Curiously, there is a symptomatic linguistic phenomenon on the idiosyncratic side of subjectivity. In Finnish, the inflexion of words is very common, e.g., genitive, accusative and so on are indicated by inflexion. Even proper names inflect. The genitive of the male name Matti would be Matin, the family name Virtanen would be Virtasen, and so on. Recently, a growing number of individuals have begun to omit this inflexion from their names, and the habit is spreading to newspapers and the daily media. Presumably, the reason for the omission is, on one hand, the pressure of the non-inflecting Indo-European languages and, on the other hand, the fact that without the inflexion the names are more recognisable and the possibility of mistakes is eliminated. Without the inflexion the name becomes like a trademark, a brand, standing out from the text or the speech in the same format every time. The non-inflected names literally show up as petrifications amid the fluidity of the rest of the language. Thus, the emphasis on subjectivity as individuality plays in the hands of European metaphysics of subjectivity.

as an occupier with regard to asubjective experience is that primitivism can not be a philosophy of the subject. A primitivist can not be a subjectivist in either of the two senses of the word "subject," because the subject is one of the main structures of universalisation and hierarchy inside experience. The subject is the arbiter that always prefers the predictable, rational and controllable. As a whole plethora of post-colonial critiques have shown, the Western notion of the subject that pretends to be universal and universally liberating, in fact contains a particular bias in favour of Western values.

Another important corollary is a way out of the paradox of "writing primitivism." Language can be used in attacking civilisation, because language does not belong to civilisation. Language was born before civilisation and will outlast it. Even the most permanent subjects and the most structural symbols are dependent on an asubjective and non-symbolic layer of experience and can be affected or wounded by it. Words as symbols could not have any emotional or experiential effect, unless an umbilical cord attached the symbolic strata to the asymbolic ones. Zerzan writes, "There is a profound truth to the notion that 'lovers need no words'" (1999: 43). This is, indeed, noteworthy. What if it was lovers who invented language? What if language in its innermost core is the intimate and non-mediated communion of lovers? This language does not represent, it is an experience, unrepeatable and unique. The same can be said of much of everyday language with its ellipses, halts and stops, figures of speech, hesitations, novelties and ungrammatical structures, and so on. Symbolic language is only the tip of this iceberg, a tip that emerges under very specific conditions and through a lot of effort. There is no private language, because (*contra* Wittgenstein) there is no permanent subjectivity: language need not be the pushing of messages outside of my self, if my self is not a fortress to begin with.

Subjective language is always also asubjective, if only minimally in Western highly subjectivised conditions. Asubjective language can have an effect on subjective language precisely because they are cut from the same cloth, and separable only as abstractions, not in real life. This, simultaneously, is the reason why the ossification of subject/object relationships can also spread further. Once begun, experiential influences can propagate in any direction and there are no ultimate barriers that could absolutely stop them. This "democracy of experiences" applies also to the barriers that exist between subjects. There is no *a priori* reason why the socially constructed boundaries of subjects could always act as the limits of experience.

Again, it is a commonplace that a new-born and her mother often form an inseparable experiential field. We noted Zerzan's view of lovers, above. There is no *a priori* reason to think that the new-born, the mother, the lovers would not *speak*. The human brain is already a widely distributed system with centres, margins and dead-ends of its own. It would be a miracle if it would not happen that areas of "my" brain would sometimes be more closely connected to areas of "your" brain — or the non-human environment — than they are to some parts of itself. Asubjective experience by its nature is spread over several experiential centres, and in that sense is always collective and shared rather than individual and punctual. The "small" distributions of child-mother, lover-lover are one example, but dissolution in the hunt or in national experience provide larger-scale examples of collective non-symbolic experience and the accompanying collective non-symbolic language.

When Zerzan writes that "Civilization is often thought of not as a forgetting but as a remembering, wherein language enables accumulated knowledge to be transmitted forward, allowing us to profit from other's experiences as though they were our own. Perhaps what is forgotten is simply that other's experiences are *not* our own, that the civilizing process is thus a vicarious and inauthentic one" (1999: 35); he is only partly right. Civilization indeed is a forgetting — it is a forgetting of the shared asubjective experience. Furthermore, it is the compartmentalisation, individualisation and objectification of that shared experience. Asubjective experience is not my "own" in any of the senses of the word: it is not owned (controlled, decided over) by me, and it is not "inside" myself. These two characteristics also provide the "uncanniness" of asubjective experience, and are therefore one major reason why civilisation wants to forget and discipline it (as Heidegger and Bataille, among others, suspected). Zerzan elaborates: "It has been asserted that reification is necessary to mental functioning, that the formation of concepts which can themselves be mistaken for living properties and relationships does away with the otherwise almost intolerable experience of relating one experience to another" (1999: 34). We need to add: it does away with the otherwise almost intolerable experience of relating to each other without the barriers of subjectivity. The subjectification of language is a way of forgetting about asubjective community and communion.

To be sure, civilisation is at its peak, and language is corrupted and technologised roughly to the same extent as life itself. Other

ways of thinking and speaking demand other ways of life. Thus we are back to the question of how to go about increasing experiential immediacy and intensity, decreasing division of labour and reification, without at the same time ending up in national socialism, heroic individual life-boatism or something similar. One of the beautiful features of Zen Buddhist practice, with regard to its promise of getting rid of individual subjectivity and of the mind altogether, is the robustness of the tradition and the power of example. There are no guarantees, no knock-down arguments, just a good track-record and teachers that are willing to show the way. Maybe this is the key relevance of the anarcho-primitivist anthropological record: to set up the examples that can be taught and applied.

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